



## Inventing the Social World

A dollar bill is just a piece of paper. Although it is nicely printed, it is not a precious work of art. So how can a dollar bill have value? Why should anyone trade a cup of coffee for a piece of paper? It can only be because people with coffee believe that paper money can be traded for things they want. If people did not believe that paper money could be traded for things they want, such money would be worthless.

The power and reality of money derive from shared belief, nothing more. People who have lots of money are powerful because they can use their money to get others to work for them. If no one would trade goods and services for money, having money would bring a person no power. For money to bring power, people must create and share a belief in its value—and then they must act as if that belief were true.

Think of the diplomas you have or will get. You probably hope that these pieces of paper will help you get a job. But why should anyone give you a job because of a piece of paper? A diploma is no proof that you are competent, honest, or hard-working. If a diploma helps you get a job, it is only because an employer believes that in getting the diploma you acquired skills and habits that will make you a good worker. If employers stopped believing this, diplomas would be worthless in the labor market, and many schools would be empty.

Wars could not happen without shared belief. If a teacher said to you, "The students in the back row are evil, and you must kill them before they kill you," you would probably not rise up and attack anybody. But suppose the president went on television and said,

"The people in Oceania are evil and want to destroy our way of life, so we must bomb them before they attack us." What then? Would you volunteer to fly the planes and drop bombs? Would you cheer as the bombs fell? Many people would, even though they knew nothing about the people in Oceania.

For wars to happen, people in one country must believe that ordinary people in another country are a serious threat; that politicians tell the truth; that it is okay to kill if an elected official says so; and that there is no peaceful way to resolve conflict. When these beliefs are plainly stated, they seem so unlikely to be true that it is astounding that wars ever occur. Yet wars involving millions of people have occurred, and still do. We can see from this that shared belief is enormously consequential.

To talk about the power of shared belief is to talk about the power of ideas. In America, where many people like to think of themselves as down-to-earth, the power of ideas is often not grasped. Sociological mindfulness helps us appreciate this power more fully. As the examples of money, diplomas, and wars show, ideas matter a great deal. (When a person says, "Ideas are just talk; they don't matter," s/he is misled by a dangerous idea.) But we should also see that money, diplomas, and wars are not special cases. Every part of the social world exists only because of the ideas people embrace and act upon.

## What the Social World Is Made Of

To say that the social world exists only *because* of ideas does not mean that it is an illusion. Bodies are not illusions, nor are their tendencies to act in certain ways. Families, schools, banks, churches, clubs, corporations, towns, governments, armies, and nations are not illusions, either. You cannot wish them away. They consist of people doing things together in recurrent orderly ways. That is really what the social world is made of: patterns of activity.

We don't usually put it that way. Usually we talk about families, schools, banks, churches, clubs, corporations, towns, governments, armies, nations, and so on. But these are just names for patterns of activity that involve lots of people. It is because people share ideas about how to do things together that these patterns persist.

Ideas let us get things done together, in familiar ways, day after day. Without ideas to guide, inspire, and justify what we do, we



would have no society. Ideas do not grow on trees, of course; we cannot just pick one to help when we are confused, disorganized, or in conflict with others. If we lack the ideas we need to solve certain problems, or to inspire or justify certain actions, then we must create those ideas. Humans have a wonderful and sometimes frightening capacity for doing this. We can interpret, imagine, or justify almost anything.

The social world is no less real because its existence depends on ideas invented by human beings. Its reality is different, however, from that of stars and trees and bacteria. Humans did not create stars and trees and bacteria, all of which existed long before hominids evolved on earth. On the other hand, there were no families, schools, churches, governments, and so on until humans came along. These things exist only because of ideas and ways of doing things devised, ages ago, by human beings struggling to survive.

To say that the social world is a human invention sounds strange because this makes it seem arbitrary and flimsy, and that is not how we usually perceive it. The social world usually seems solid and durable, as if it existed apart from us and could be touched. It also seems compelling and real, at least most of the time.

One reason the social world is durable is that people refuse to doubt the ideas that hold it together. Suppose, for example, that you thought your parents were alien shape-shifters. If you told anyone of your belief, you would seem crazy. People wouldn't believe you, because to do so they would have to doubt many of the ideas on which their sense of reality depends. Most people, even those who act crazy at times, dislike this kind of disorientation. Every human mind strains in the opposite direction—toward making sense.

People also hold tightly to ideas because those ideas tell them what is right and wrong. "Thou shalt not kill" is just an idea, but it is a good one for guiding behavior, since it makes it safe to live with others. To threaten such a basic idea is to threaten society itself. There are many other such ideas about moral behavior, ideas that people see as essential to hold society (as they would like it to be) together. It is no wonder that people resist changing these ideas and even insist that such ideas be respected as sacred.

Ideas like this also allow people to feel good about themselves. How do you know that you are a good person? Because you have learned a set of ideas for judging yourself and your behavior. You have probably learned, for example, that kindness, generosity, and forgiveness are qualities of a good person. If you see these qualities

in yourself, you can feel worthy of esteem in your own eyes and in the eyes of others. All of us relish these feelings of self-worth and resist changing the ideas on which such feelings depend.

The ideas that hold society together or help people feel good about themselves are often protected by other ideas. For example, some people might say, "These principles on which our society is based come from God and must never be changed." Other people might say, "In ancient times our wisest elders devised these principles, and we must not change them or else our society and everything we hold dear will perish." In either case, the attempt is to make society durable. To the people in it, a society thus will seem solid and real, for as long as it lasts.

Ideas shape people's feelings, too. When people settle into a way of understanding the world, they are also settling into a way of feeling about it, about others, and about themselves. Perhaps these feelings are pleasant, perhaps not. Either way, people can feel as if they are being pushed around emotionally—perhaps pushed toward feelings they don't want to have—when their ideas are challenged. So it is no wonder that people resist giving up familiar ideas and try to keep the world as they know it intact.

### Habits and Invisible Ideas

You might wonder where all these familiar ideas can be found. Are they in books? Some are. But most exist only in people's heads, or are embodied in habit, and have never been spoken or written down. None of us is aware of all the ideas we hold and act upon. This is because many of our ideas are deep assumptions so taken for granted that, under ordinary circumstances, we do not think to question them.

You probably assume, for example, that this book is not a radio transmitter beaming messages into your brain. You probably do not suspect that the paper is coated with a drug, absorbed through the skin, that causes ringing in the ears. You probably also assume that this book will not explode when you reach page 67. Yet you have not been conscious of making any such assumptions, because they were so deep that you never became aware of them. A lot of our behavior is like this, rooted in places we never look.

The invisibility of the ideas that hold the social world together is part of what makes it seem so real. It's as if the social world were



held together by invisible threads that wrap around us. Only when we try to pull away, to break from the pattern in some way, do we experience the realness, the tangible force, of the threads. If we are sociologically mindful, we can see these threads being spun by ordinary people in everyday life.

Many of the ideas that hold the social world together are invisible because they are built into habit. For example, as a child you were probably taught to brush your teeth before bed. Perhaps you asked why and your parents explained about cavities and dentists. You still know all this, but now you brush your teeth as a matter of habit. The idea "I should brush my teeth to avoid painful dental work" is built into your habit; you don't have to review the ideas that originally led to the formation of the habit. This is true of all habits. Once upon a time we were told why we should do a certain thing, or maybe we figured it out for ourselves, and now we do it without thinking. The guiding ideas are still there, though visible only as habits.

Teeth-brushing is a dull example, but it makes a useful point: Some seemingly personal habits are part of a culture. Before you were born, someone devised teeth-brushing as a way to avoid tooth decay. This was a solution (or a partial one) to a problem that existed before you did. Today almost all children are taught to brush their teeth. This is the sense in which teeth-brushing has become part of the culture. People now do it routinely.

Culture is created in this way. Someone finds a solution to a problem, other people see that it works and adopt it, and eventually the solution becomes "what everyone does." For a time people remember the idea behind the practice, but then, after a while, they forget. "This is just how we do things," they begin to say. When children come along they are taught the practice as a matter of course, perhaps with little explanation of the ideas on which it was originally based. It is as if the practice—the behavior that solves the problem—becomes part of a sediment that constitutes culture.

One time a student talked in class about her career plans. She expected to work hard after graduation, get promoted fast, and make lots of money. Then she said she would slow down when it came time to have babies. I asked her why, if she wanted to pursue a career with such zeal, she would impede her upward climb by having babies. She looked at me and didn't say anything for a moment. Then she said, "I don't know. I guess I never considered *not* getting married and having babies." Now there is a powerful cultural habit! It is so ingrained that many people do not even think about behaving differently.

## Confronting the Social World as Ready-Made

Think about your first experience of school. There you found a set of arrangements worked out before you arrived. No one asked if you liked having teachers, principals, and other students around; no one asked if you liked homework, tests, and grades; no one asked if you liked meeting indoors, sitting in hard desks, and having only a half hour for recess. All this—the social world of school—was there waiting for you, and you had to deal with it, like it or not. What you were facing were other people’s habitual ways of doing things together.

When you take a new job it is much the same. Your boss says, “This is how we do things here. This is what your job consists of.” Your coworkers say, “You can bend the rules a little, but not too much.” Again you face a set of arrangements and must adjust to a reality that seems to exist apart from you. We go through life like this, repeatedly adjusting to habits and expectations formed by people who preceded us. Experiencing this time and again makes the social world seem very real—and of course it is, as long as everyone carries on as if it is.

The social world seems so real in part because it confronts us as ready-made. As children, we’re taught the ideas and habits that our parents and teachers found useful. We don’t have much choice about this. Although we might question some of what we’re taught, we mostly accept it because it’s hard to get along otherwise.

Every society is built on a set of practices through which people meet their needs for food, clothing (usually), and shelter. To change these practices—especially those that seem to work well—is risky. People are reluctant to abandon an old but workable system and thereby risk being unable to provide for themselves. Those who benefit the most from the old system will of course be least likely to want to change it. Anyone who tries to do so may discover that the social world is maintained not only with ideas that affect minds, but also with tools, such as guns and bullets, that affect bodies.

## Making People Disappear

It is not easy to become and remain mindful of the social world as humanly made. For many reasons the social world seems to be “just there,” as if no one were responsible for making it. So what? What difference does it make if we forget that the social world is



a human invention? The difference it makes is like that between using one's tools with an awareness of what they are good for and letting those tools—as if they had minds and will of their own—take charge.

The failure to see the social world as humanly made is called reification, which can also be defined as the tendency to see the humanly made world as having a will and force of its own, apart from human beings. For example, someone might say, "Computer technology is the major force behind changes in our economy today." In this statement, computer technology is reified because it is spoken of as having a will of its own, independent of human beings. It is technology that appears to make things happen.

"Computer technology," however, is only metal and plastic. People forge these materials, turn them into computers and other devices, and then decide how to put such tools to work. All along the way there are people who choose what to build and how to use the results. But if we talk about technology as if it were a force in its own right, the people who do the building and choosing disappear. It thus seems as if technology is like gravity or the wind—a natural force about which we can do nothing.

Reification keeps us from seeing that the force attributed to technology comes from *people* choosing to do things together in certain ways. If we don't see this, we may forget to ask important questions, such as, Who is choosing to build what kinds of devices? Why? How will our society be changed? Who stands to benefit and who stands to lose because of these changes? Should we avoid these changes? Who will be held accountable if these changes hurt people? Should we decide to use technology in some other ways?

Here is another example of reification: "The market responded with enthusiasm to today's rise in interest rates, although economists predict that this could have unfavorable consequences for employment." You've probably heard this kind of statement before. It sounds like a report about a flood or some other natural disaster. Yet a market is just a lot of people doing things together in a certain way; interest rates are established by people; and employment results from choices by employers. Reification makes these people and their choices disappear.

In a large complex society the tendency to reify is strong because it can be hard to see where, how, and by whom decisions are made. And so it is easier to say that technology, the market, or a mysterious *They* is making things happen. Even people who ought to know

better get caught up in this. When sociologists say things like “Trends in inner-city industrial development are causing changes in family structure,” they too are guilty of reification. Such language again makes it seem as if no one is responsible for choosing to act in a way that hurts or helps others.

Reification thus keeps us from seeing who is doing what to whom, and how, such that certain consequences arise. This makes it hard to hold anyone accountable for the good or bad results arising from their actions. Usually it is powerful people whose actions are hidden and who get off the hook.

Reification can also make us feel powerless because the social world comes to seem like a place that is beyond human control. If we attribute independent force to abstractions such as “technology,” “the market,” “government,” “trends,” “social structure,” or “society,” then it can seem pointless even to try to intervene and make things happen differently. We might as well try to stop the tides. People who think this way are likely to remain passive even when they see others being put out of work, living in poverty, or caught up in war, because they will feel that nothing can be done.

When we reify the social world we are confusing its reality with that of stars and trees and bacteria. These things indeed exist (as material entities) independent of human ideas and action. But no part of the social world does. To reify is to forget this; it is to forget to be mindful of the social world as a humanly made place. As a result, we forget that it is within our collective power to re-create the world in a better way. If we are sociologically mindful, we recognize that the social world as it now exists is just one of many possibilities.

### Inventing Categories and Inventing People

Even if we believe that one way of schooling, churching, or governing is best, we can still admit that these ways of doing things together depend on ideas and habits invented by people. It can be harder to accept that the same principle applies to social constructions that have to do with who we think we are.

For example, many people think that they belong to a “race” and that races are visible, biological realities. But races, too, are human inventions. When people talk about distinct races, as if there were significant genetic differences among human groups that produce differences in intelligence and behavior, they are mistaken. “White”



people, “black” people, and so on had to be defined into existence. Such groups were invented, once upon a time, largely for political reasons.

Race is, of course, a social reality. Based on skin tone and place of ancestral origin, people are defined as belonging to races, and such labels can affect how people are treated, whom they live with, the customs they learn, and how they think of themselves. But, again, all this results from the invention of schemes for sorting people into groups. We could sort people according to eye color, height, or warmth of heart. If we acted on these new schemes, they would be just as real and consequential as our current ideas about race.

Just as some people think they can see race when they see a person’s skin, others think they can see gender when they see an infant’s genitals. “Ah, this one has a penis—it’s a boy. And this one, with a vagina, is a girl,” people say. But it is a mistake to equate genitalia with gender. While penises and vaginas are plainly part of human bodies, gender is something that humans must be taught.

If we did not assign the meanings we do to penises and vaginas, if we did not have the cultural habits of treating the possessors of these organs differently, we would not produce girls and boys, women and men. Such creatures are the results of many people embracing and acting on similar ideas. Other ideas and behaviors would produce different kinds of people. Men and women, as we know them, are just one set of possibilities.

Seeing race and gender as social constructions can be troubling because it makes it seem as if we have no substance as individuals, as if our sense of who we are could melt into air at any time. There is a grain of truth in this fear, even though people do not dissolve so easily.

It is true that if you had been born into a different social world, you would be a different person. You might never have learned to think of yourself as, for example, a man or a woman, as black or white, as European or African, as gay or straight. All these identities derive from invented categories; they are not part of nature. In fact, all your ideas about who and what you are come from the social world in which you were raised.

Perhaps you can see here another reason why a humanly made world seems so real: It gets inside us. The ideas that hold the social world together tell us who we are. If we didn’t keep believing in the reality of the social world, we might lose a sense of our realness as individuals. Fearing such a condition, many people refuse to

study the making of the social world, preferring instead to believe that it has supernatural origins and follows a blueprint devised in the heavens.

### Inventing the Truth

If any of my ideas run counter to ones you hold, you might wonder whose are true, mine or yours. That's an important matter to consider, but I will let you do it on your own. Here I want to make another point about the constructedness of the social world. The point is this: The rules we use to decide which ideas are true are also invented.

You could, for example, follow a rule that says, "Accept as true what is written in books that are widely believed to be divinely inspired." Or you could follow a rule that says, "Accept as true only those things you can verify for yourself." Or your rule could be "Accept as true only what has been proven by science." You can find people who embrace these and other rules for deciding what is true.

Whichever rule you prefer, it will be one that you learned as a matter of growing up in a particular place and time. It will be a rule invented by people and passed on to you like any other notion about how best to do things. Figuring out what is real and true is as much a matter of cultural habit as teeth-brushing. We can do it almost without thinking, which is helpful in some cases and harmful in others.

This is how it is with humans: First we make rules for believing, then we follow our rules as a matter of habit, settle our beliefs, and presume to know how things really are, as if the truth had come to us through no effort at all. It might seem self-evident, for example, that the moon is not made of green cheese. To accept this claim as true, however, we must share understandings of what is meant by "moon," "cheese," and "is made of." We must also agree on what would constitute evidence for or against such a claim (must we have a sample of the moon? what if the sample is 99% mineral and 1% cheese?). If we can agree on these matters, we can create a true idea about the moon, just like we create true ideas about other things.

If we practice sociological mindfulness, we pay attention not only to how the world is socially constructed, but also to how we invent ways to decide what is real and true. If we do this, we may



be more open to understanding how other people arrive at different ideas about what is real and true. We might also be less likely to insist that other people accept our picture of the world as the only true picture. We might even be more open to considering the pictures other people create.

The point of being mindful about the invention of truth is not to discover the best rules for deciding what is true. There are no best rules, only rules that are more or less useful, depending on our purposes. So the point is not to get at truer truths, but to better understand how social reality is created by paying attention to how people decide what is real and true. You will see two things if you pay attention to this process: Not everyone has an equal say in deciding what is real and true, and truth often bends toward power.

## How to See the Social World Being Made

How can we see the social world being made? All we need to do is to pay attention in the right way to what is going on around us all the time. Instructions for how to pay attention to the social construction of the world can be put in the form of admonitions and questions. It is a matter of knowing what to look for and what to ask.

First, look for people solving problems together. Here you will see habits and routines being formed. When two or more people confront a common problem, arrive at a similar view of it, and devise a solution for it, they are creating a piece of social reality. When their solution is taught to other people, and when that way of doing things becomes a matter of habit for them, a piece of culture is formed. If this routine way of doing things involves lots of people coordinating their actions day after day, an institution is formed.

Ask who benefits from certain ways of doing things. Solutions for some people can create problems for others. For example, putting people out of work (downsizing a firm) might increase profits for employers, but it hurts workers. Certain ways of organizing school might be good for teachers because students are kept under control, but this might not be so good for students. So in looking at any social arrangement ask, "Who benefits and who suffers?" You will find that there is often a great deal of conflict underlying the construction of the social world.

Watch for the invention of labels and categories, especially ones applied to people. Pay attention to disputes over the meanings

given to these labels and categories, which often become the basis for people's identities. Observe how people are put into one category or another, how they are labeled in one way or another, and how they come to accept or reject certain identities. The meanings given to these labels, categories, and identities determine whether people will be respected, ignored, or abused. If you watch as these meanings are created and negotiated, you'll see social reality being constructed and people's lives being shaped.

Be mindful of the labels and categories you use to know yourself and others. Ask who invented these labels and categories. Ask who benefits from them and who is hurt. Ask how the meanings of these labels and categories affect people's behavior. The answers will not always be easy to find, but they must be sought if you want to be a responsible participant in the making of social reality. How else can you understand what you are doing and what you are a part of?

Watch for the assumptions people make when they claim that something in the social world is real. Look to see what people take for granted. Look to see what they refuse to doubt. Look for these things and you'll find the bedrock on which people build their sense of reality. It is good practice to inspect your own foundations as well.

Also pay attention to how people create among themselves a version of the truth. To see this you have to watch what goes on between people when matters of truth are being decided. Who says what? What sorts of arguments are accepted as plausible and convincing? What kinds of evidence are accepted as compelling? What assumptions are rejected right from the start? If you can discern these things, if you can learn to see the process as it unfolds, you will be able to see how groups of people create the different truths and social worlds in which they live.

## Remaking the Social World

Although I have said that the social world seems to exist as if it were a hard and durable thing that could survive on its own, that is only how it seems. In fact, the social world could not continue to exist if we did not reenact it every day. We are part of it; our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors keep it going. Part of being sociologically mindful is paying attention to how we do this. Which ideas do we pass on to others, perhaps inadvertently? Which habits, routines, and



institutions do we support with our actions? Which ones do we oppose? If we are to understand the making of the social world, we have to see how we contribute to its making.

Part of being sociologically mindful of the constructedness of the social world is seeing the possibility of changing it. This means recognizing the possibility of acting differently, of choosing not to support arrangements that are harmful or unjust. The consequences of not conforming might be severe, but we should not pretend that we do not have a choice. The only time we really do not have a choice is when it never occurs to us that we do. Once we are aware of the possibility of acting differently, it is dishonest to say, "I had no choice. I had to do what I had to do." What we're really saying is "Because the consequences of doing X were more than I could bear, I chose to do Y instead." It is harder to say this, because it means taking responsibility for what we do.

What we do as individuals might not seem to have much effect on the world. Often our acts of resistance seem to go unnoticed. But it is through small acts that the world is remade.

Suppose you realize that a certain cultural habit (e.g., throwing away usable glass bottles) harms the environment. That is a problem for you, so you find a way around it, a way to act differently. You offer that solution (a way to recycle) to others who share your concern. Pretty soon quite a few people are acting differently, and the social world is being changed, if only gradually and in a small way. Perhaps at some point a balance is tipped and more dramatic changes occur suddenly. History unfolds like this sometimes.

The making of the social world is always a collaboration; we can neither make nor remake anything *social* by ourselves. Our ideas, our solutions, must be communicated to and must appeal to other people. Only by paying attention to others' unmet needs and showing them how to do things differently so that these needs can be met are we likely to make any big changes. Our power lies, in other words, in our ability to communicate with others, through words and deeds, so that they can see the benefits of doing things differently.

It might seem as if there is a contradiction here. On the one hand, I have said that everything about the social world is a result of shared belief and of people doing things together in recurrent orderly ways. This seems to leave little room for individuality. Yet in talking about world-making and change, I have emphasized individual responsibility and initiative. How can it be both ways? If people must adjust themselves to established cultural habits and

other social arrangements, if they are so thoroughly shaped by these habits and arrangements, how can they ever resist?

For one thing, human minds are unruly. They are not like computers that do only what they're told. Minds generate images and longings and strange, unpredictable impulses. These products of mind are the seeds of dissatisfaction, resistance, creativity, and change. No doubt you can conjure images of desirable objects, situations, and experiences—ones that do not exist in your life today. Your mind can always reach beyond everyday life and create longings for something more—more pleasures, challenges, satisfactions—than you now enjoy. Your mind, and everyone else's, tends to generate dissatisfaction with what exists, if only because you can imagine things being better.

When people share their feelings about what exists, and share their imaginings about what might exist, they often begin to recognize problems where they saw none before, perhaps because of what they took for granted. This sort of conversation can create awareness that a problem is in fact widely shared, even if no one had seen it very clearly before. If people then say, "Let's see if we can solve our common problem," and go on to devise a new way of doing things together, the social world is indeed remade.

So while it is true that for the most part we must adjust to the social world that precedes us, even as we learn to adjust—in part by developing minds and the ability to get along with others—we also acquire the inclination and power to remake the world, to force it to adjust to us, if only a little at a time. Being sociologically mindful, we thus see that human beings are both social products and social forces. Though we are shaped by the world, we are still, each of us, a place on earth where ideas and feelings clash inside a body that can act to affect other bodies. And that is how change is made to happen.

A student once said, "Seeing the world as humanly invented takes all the magic and mystery out of it, like the whole thing is nothing special." To him the world could be mysterious and special only if supernatural powers were behind it. I said that I wondered why some people needed to believe in the supernatural. I said that I marveled at the human capacity to invent ideas about such things. I said that it was a mystery to me how people, in a scientific era, could sustain belief in gods and ghosts. My point was to say that the social world becomes fascinating in new ways if we pay attention to its making, especially to the ironies and contradictions in which people entangle themselves.



We can be intensely mindful of how the social world is made and still not see all there is to see. There is always something new around the corner, behind our backs, or under our feet. And often we are so busy living that we don't see what we're making happen. This means that we can always spend tomorrow trying to understand what we did today. There is always more analytic thinking to be done about social life, since life always runs ahead of our ability to make sense of it.

Being sociologically mindful is thus not a way to see everything, as if everything could be so easily seen. It is a way to see more deeply into the process of world-making and to appreciate the nature of the social world as a human accomplishment. Even if we never fathom it fully, by trying to do so we can live more interesting and responsible lives. We can also see better how we might remake the world into a place where more people can live good lives.

## ◆ ◆     DIALOGUE     ◆ ◆

### Overcoming the One-Dimensional View

I have heard that some people are bothered by the idea that the social world is humanly made. One student, I was told, refused even to entertain the idea that gender is socially constructed. I suspect that this resistance comes from a wish to believe that our social arrangements—perhaps especially those concerning gender, sexuality, race, and social class—are divinely ordained. I'm sure it is also frightening for some people to think that their ideas about supernatural beings are no less social constructions than their ideas about clothes, movies, and music.

All of the above is said or implied elsewhere in *TSEL*. Here I would like to make a point about why the invention of the social world is hard for some people to see. I will also suggest a way around this problem.

Suppose you have lived all your life within a single culture and have never been to a country that is different from your own. If this were the case, it might seem as if human culture is the same everywhere. It might also be hard to appreciate the variety of beliefs and practices that people have created to help them survive in diverse environments. In other words, if you haven't seen, or learned about,

the range of human cultural diversity, it might seem that there isn't much. This lack of information would probably make it harder to see one's own culture as an invention, just like all the others.

How many human cultures have there been? We can't know for sure, because many were never documented. An answer would also depend on how we define a distinct culture. If we look back across the span of known human history, a safe answer would be "thousands." Today we have information on about three hundred distinct cultures that have been studied by anthropologists in modern times (look up the *Human Relations Area Files* in the library or on the Internet). Just knowing that so many different cultures exist, or have existed, should give pause to anyone who thinks that his or her own culture represents the full range of human possibility.

Some people might thus be led to underestimate cultural diversity simply by a lack of information or experience. But sometimes power has a lot to do with it, too. Consider the case of Native Americans, or the peoples often called North American Indians.

If I asked most non-Indian people in the United States to tell me what Indian culture was like in pre-Columbus days, they would probably mention feathered headdresses, bows and arrows, hunting buffalo on horseback, and living in tepees. For many non-Indians, this image is all they know. Yet this is a narrow stereotypical image based on Hollywood portrayals of eighteenth-century Plains Indians. Even white people who claim to respect the ecological or spiritual wisdom of Native Americans often mistakenly lump all Indians into one group.

There was and is far more cultural diversity among North American Indians than most non-Indians ever grasp. A widely accepted estimate is that in pre-Columbus times there were about three hundred separate languages spoken by the indigenous peoples living in the area that is today known as North America. Each language could be said to reflect a different culture. We also know that across the continent the economies, religions, governments, and other customs of indigenous peoples varied considerably. This diversity was at least as great as that among Europeans, yet it all disappears under the label "Indians."

Suppose I asked how many Indian tribes exist today. Many non-Indians might say "a dozen," even if they couldn't name that many. Others might guess higher, perhaps twenty. A few people might go as high as one hundred. But even that is too low. There are 560 tribes officially recognized by the U.S. government, plus



about 400 unrecognized bands and clans. Not all of the tribes are large, but, as of the 2000 Census, over 30 tribes had more than 8,000 members.

I have asked these questions in classes, and so I know that many non-Indians guess too low. Even people who claim Native American ancestry often guess too low. So what does all this have to do with power?

In Chapter 10, I will say more about power, but here it will suffice to say that I am referring to the political and economic power of groups. European peoples, those collectively defining themselves as "white," have had far more power than any other group in U.S. history. This matters, in the present example, because one privilege that comes with being a member of a dominant group is not having to learn much about those who are less powerful. Historically, then, whites have often been oblivious to differences within groups of people who are not categorized as "white."

It is thus no surprise that most whites know little about diversity among North American Indians. Beyond what might be learned, inadvertently, from television and movies, whites are not otherwise compelled to study Native American cultures. This isn't about individual white people being lazy. It's about what typically happens when one group dominates another. The humanity of the powerless group often gets erased, and a whole people—as internally diverse as any other—gets reduced to a stereotype. And because the culture of a dominant group tends to shape society as a whole, everyone is affected. That's why most people, not only whites, have so little knowledge of cultural diversity among the indigenous peoples of North America.

The point of this example is to illustrate why it's hard for some people to see the social world as humanly made. What it comes down to is this: Members of powerful or privileged groups, because they have little incentive to study people other than themselves, often end up with a limited view of human diversity. It comes to seem that everyone, or everyone who matters, is like them. The result is not merely a lack of knowledge about others, but a lack of perspective on one's own culture. It is this lack of perspective that supports the illusion of one's own culture being a gift of the gods rather than a design for living invented by those who preceded us.

The example of North American Indians is just one of many. Whenever we see enormous power differences between groups, we should suspect that a similar process might be at work. Consider

how little Americans typically know about the thoughts and feelings of people in Third World countries. Here again we can see how power (or being at the center of a powerful empire) breeds ignorance. Being sociologically mindful, we would beware of this tendency and make efforts to compensate for it. Doing this is how we can claim our power to invent a different kind of social world.

## ◆ ◆ ◆ A NOTE ON COMMON SENSE ◆ ◆ ◆

I've heard it said, and not as a compliment, that sociology is just common sense. The claim is that anyone who has common sense already knows how to think sociologically. In my observation, this isn't true (see pp. 4–7 in Chapter 1). People can have the kind of practical intelligence that helps them solve problems in their daily lives—and this is usually what we mean when we say that someone has common sense—yet not see the world in a sociological way.

For example, many people who grow up in U.S. culture learn the commonsense ideas that equal opportunity is available to everyone and that all it takes to succeed are talent and hard work, because individual merit will be recognized and fairly rewarded. I often hear this from students at the start of the semester when I teach about inequality.

But as we study inequality sociologically, students learn to see how children start life equipped with vastly different levels of resources, depending on the social class of their families; how the pyramidal shape of the job market makes it impossible for *everyone* to get ahead; how powerful groups hoard opportunities; how networks limit access to information crucial for getting ahead; and how chances to develop one's abilities, to display competence, and to be recognized depend on conditions and processes over which none of us has much control.

Thinking about inequality in these sociological terms is, for many people, a challenge to their common sense. Looking at the constructedness of the social world, as I did in the foregoing chapter, can pose an even greater threat. So while sociological thinking and common sense can overlap, they can also conflict. By definition, being *mindful* about anything means going beyond knowledge that is *common*.

Once upon a time, common sense told us that the earth was flat and was at the center of the universe. Today we know better. But



the displacement of entrenched common sense didn't happen easily, because common sense is often embraced more for its comfort value than for its truth. Which means that strain and strife are inevitable whenever an empirical, analytic perspective—like sociology—puts common sense to the test.

## PATHS FOR REFLECTION

1. Earlier I cited the idea “thou shalt not kill” as one that makes it safe to live in the company of others. But things are not so simple. Even in societies where people claim to accept this idea, there is killing. Sometimes this happens in moments of crisis, when people feel their own lives are threatened, or in moments of passion, when people “lose their heads,” so to speak. In the United States, it also happens in a cold and calculated way when a person convicted of a crime is put to death. What ideas are used to justify violation of the commandment not to kill? Why do some people believe that it is okay for the government to kill, even when their religion would seem to tell them otherwise?

2. Many people still see gender as naturally rooted in differences between male and female bodies. There are, of course, bodily differences that lead to differences in function: Only women can have babies. Such a basic fact of human biology is bound to affect how some parts of social life are organized. To consider how this might be the case is not inconsistent with being sociologically mindful. Yet we must be careful about this, because many common ideas about possible links between biology and social behavior were invented to justify domination and exploitation. How do popular notions about the biological basis of gender (or race, or sexuality) function in this way? Who benefits if such notions are widely accepted?

3. Scientists once believed that when an object burned, it gave off a substance called phlogiston, visible as flame. Physicians once believed that sickness was caused by an imbalance of humors (sort of like emotional energies) in the blood. Biologists once believed that species could not go out of existence, nor could new species come into existence. Geologists once believed that the continents did not move. Most people used to believe that the sun revolved around the earth and that the earth was the center of the universe.

We now know that all of these ideas, once accepted by many intelligent people, are untrue. Which currently popular ideas about “human nature,” social behavior, or the social world seem likely to be discarded over the next hundred years? How do you suppose this will happen?

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